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SUBJECT: TRIP REPORT: NO-NONSENSE GOVERNOR OF TARABA TALKS POLITICS WITH THE AMBASSADOR

Classified By: Ambassador Robin Renee Sanders for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)
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(C) Summary. On November 13-14, the Ambassador led an interagency delegation of USG officials to Taraba State for a capacity building workshop on agriculture and AGOA as part of a public-private partnership with the GON's Bank of Industry.

The Ambassador spent several hours with Taraba Governor Danbaba Suntai, and had an opportunity to discuss Nigeria's political climate. In a private luncheon conversation (StaffAide, notetaker), the governor spoke candidly about President Yar'Adua's health and his preferred presidential candidate should the Supreme Court nullify the 2007 Election.

(C) On November 14, in a private meeting at the Government Lodge in Jalingo, Taraba State, Governor Danbaba Suntai of the PDP party and a friend of President Yar'Adua told the Ambassador that the president's health seems to have improved over the last month and that he appears to be getting back to his old self. The Ambassador asked about reports of other serious health issues, to which the governor replied that he was only familiar with the kidney condition with which the president has been struggling for the past eight years, and that he was unaware of any new medical condition. The governor said he knew the president well after working closely with him when they were both governors (Yar'Adua was governor of Katsina State), and that he "is not as corrupt as the others." He added that the president is "tested" and that even though it takes a while to get things done, he has a good head on his shoulders and is an able manager with a committed vision for his country. On the topic of the Supreme Court potentially annulling the 2007 Presidential Election, Governor Suntai told the Ambassador that even though he is a committed member of the PDP party, he would want to see Buhari elected as president because "he has the integrity to do the right thing for this country." He was very critical of former Vice President Atiku Abubakar of neighboring Adamawa State, saying he was one of the most corrupt people he knew and if he were to win the re-election it would only be as a result of "buying the votes of the masses by spreading around so much money."

(SBU) While in Taraba, the Ambassador kicked off a workshop on strengthening agriculture and taking advantage of opportunities to use the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act. She brought officials from USDA, USAID, Bank of Industry, the World Cocoa Foundation and the West Africa Regional Trade Hub to the state to facilitate several workshops and breakout sessions. She also accompanied the governor to a tea farm and factory, and paid a courtesy visit to the Emir of Muri,

who appeared to be a very knowledgable and progressive traditional ruler.

(C) Comment. Taraba Governor Suntai is a PDP stalwart, but tough on corruption and crime in his state. He demonstrated a no-nonsense kind of personality, with a strong desire to move his state forward on agricultural development, particularly in the areas of highland tea, poultry and cassava exporting. He knows President Yar'Adua well from when he was governor of Katsina State and had no problem saying, "he is probably the least corrupt person in government," leading us to understand that the president has to do what he needs to survive politically in Nigeria. The governor also added that Katsina had one of the most limited budgets of all states, but then-governor Yar'Adua did the most for the development of that state in comparison with other states with larger budgets. The Ambassador has been to 16 or 17 states, and found Katsina to be one of the best run, most organized, and cleanest states (Kwara follows closely) with several state programs for its people, including a world-class, science-focused university slated to open early next year. End comment.

Sanders